

**New Jersey Department of Education
Special Education Monitoring**

District: Demarest **County:** Bergen

Monitoring Dates: June 8, 2004

Monitor: Gladys Miller and Jenifer Spear

Background Information:

During the 2002-2003 school year, the **Demarest School District** conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the **Demarest School District** with an opportunity to evaluate its performance, with regard to:

- The provision of a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment;
- The protection of procedural safeguards for students and their families;
- The development and implementation of policies and procedures resulting in procedural compliance; and,
- The organization and delivery of programs and services resulting in positive student outcomes.

The self-assessment was designed to permit the district the opportunity to identify its areas of strength and promising practices, as well as areas needing improvement and areas that may be noncompliant with state and federal requirements. The **Demarest School District** developed an improvement plan to address these identified areas of need.

As the first step in verifying the self-assessment findings, in assessing the appropriateness of the improvement plan, and in determining any progress in implementing this plan, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) held a focus group meeting for parents and community members at the **County Road School Library** on the evening of May 24, 2004. Information obtained from this meeting was used to direct the focus of the subsequent monitoring activities. Additionally, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) completed a comprehensive desk audit, including review of a representative sample of student records, as well as reviews of district policies and procedures, student count information, master student lists, class lists, schedules of students, teachers, related services personnel, and other relevant information, and conducted further parent interviews by telephone. Based on these sources, OSEP staff determined that the district had conducted a thorough review during the self-assessment process and had developed a plan, warranting only minor revision, which will appropriately address all areas of identified need.

District Strengths:

The Demarest School District is commended for providing a fully integrated approach in grades kindergarten through eight. Professional staff receive formal training in Multiple Intelligences and work together on each grade level to develop specific units of study. All teachers receive information highlighting the various strategies for presenting lessons to meet the needs and strengths of their students. Further, children are assessed for particular strengths and teachers provide enrichment opportunities via differentiated

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

instruction. Beginning in grade three individual student contracts are developed resulting in a product based outcome involving the student, teacher and family.

The district is further commended for its recognition as a 2003 Benchmark School-Just For Kids New Jersey. This program offers a free web site that provides comparisons of schools through test scores and data, identifies the successful practices that result in high student achievement and helps schools to implement those effective practices. Demarest Middle School was identified as one of ten high quality, high performing elementary and middle schools across the state that will be used for comparison with other schools to help promote and export their successful policies and practices. The Middle School Principal was also named as New Jersey Principal of the Year in 2002-2003.

The school psychologist provides a lunch bunch munchers program to students to address themes such as good listening skills, making friends, turn-taking, respecting personal space, good manners, etc. Activities include drawing, role-playing and rehearsal, homework practice and demonstrating skills in the general education classrooms. Parents also receive a skill sheet for each session and children can earn rewards for participation.

Data Summary:

For the past three years, the Demarest School District's classification rate of students requiring special educational programming and services (excluding eligible for speech and language services) is 8.7%, 8.6% and 10.3%. These are below the state average. In order to ensure that students are being appropriately identified and referred, the district has developed an improvement plan that includes in-service training and procedures for professionals with educational responsibilities regarding the referral process.

For students ages six to twenty-one, the district's trend over the past three years has been to place 66% to 68% of the special education students in the general educational setting for more than 80% of the day. This is significantly higher than the current state average of 41.6%.

Additionally, review of data indicates that the district has placed pre-school disabled students in general education early childhood settings at a rate of 45.5% that is above the state's average of 23.2%.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:

Reevaluation, Pre-School Transition, Statewide Assessments, Graduation Requirements were determined to be areas of compliance by the district during self-assessment and by the Office of Special Education Programs during the on-site visit.

Section I: General Provisions

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of policies and procedures and dissemination of IDEA information.

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of in-service training for parents and professional and paraprofessional staff. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area of need.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section II: Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of provision of related services of speech, occupational and physical therapy including goals and objectives, length of school day, certifications and facilities.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of extended school year, provision of counseling as a related service with goals and objectives and transfer students. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas. During the on-site comprehensive audit, it was determined that the district has successfully implemented activities to bring about correction in these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section III: Procedural Safeguards

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of consent, notices of meetings, written notices, notices in native language, interpreters at meetings and independent evaluations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of surrogate parents. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section IV: Location, Referral and Identification

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of Child Find 3-21, direct referrals, summer referrals, health summaries, vision and hearing screenings and identification meeting timelines and participants.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns regarding the referral process and pre-referral interventions. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of need.

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section V: Protection in Evaluation and Evaluation Procedures

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of multidisciplinary evaluations, functional assessments, standardized assessments, bilingual evaluations and acceptance and or rejection of outside reports

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of written reports. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area. During the on-site comprehensive audit, it was determined that the district has successfully implemented activities to bring about correction in this area.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section VII: Eligibility

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of meetings, participants and signatures of agreement or disagreement.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of criteria, statement of eligibility, and providing a copy of evaluation reports to parents ten days prior to a meeting. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas. During the on-site comprehensive audit, it was determined that the district has successfully implemented activities to bring about correction in these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section VIII: Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of IEP meetings and participants, considerations and required statements, present level of educational performance, goals and objectives aligned with Core Curriculum Content Standards, age of majority, implementation dates and ninety day timelines.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of IEPs to parents and teacher access and responsibility. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of concern. During the on-site comprehensive audit, it was determined that the district has successfully implemented activities to bring about correction in these areas.

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

An additional area of need was identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit regarding annual review timelines.

Area(s) of Need:

Annual Review Timelines - Although the district conducts mandated annual reviews for its students, when a reevaluation is in process and the annual review date precedes the reevaluation date, the district is obtaining waivers from parents to delay the annual review meeting until the reevaluation is completed.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities to ensure annual reviews are conducted within one year from the previous annual review date. The district could conduct the reevaluation prior to reaching the annual review date, thus ensuring the development of an IEP that complies with both required timelines. Implementation of these activities will ensure that all students have a valid IEP. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of these activities.**

Section IX: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of notification and participation of out-of-district students in nonacademic and extracurricular activities.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of the decision-making process, least restrictive environment documentation, consideration of supplemental aids and services, regular education access and continuum of programs. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas. . During the on-site comprehensive audit, it was determined that the district has successfully implemented activities to bring about correction in these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section X: Transition to Post-School

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of age fourteen transition service needs, preferences and interests, survey and assessments, and agency involvement. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

Section XI: Discipline

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas functional behavioral assessment and behavior intervention plan.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of procedural safeguards, documentation to case manager, suspension tracking, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational setting and changes of placement. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section XIV: Programs and Services

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of class size waivers, age range waivers, group sizes for speech therapy, and home instruction.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns regarding scheduling conflicts with world languages and the provision of supplementary instruction and the consistent monitoring of the provision of related services. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of need.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section XV: Student Records

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of parent and adult-student access to records, access sheets, maintenance and destruction of records and documentation of locations of additional records.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of providing secured file cabinets and fax transmissions. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

Summary

Special education monitoring was completed in the **Demarest School District** on June 9, 2004. The purpose of this phase of the monitoring process was to verify the district's report of findings resulting from their self-assessment and to review the district's improvement plan. The district is commended for its exceptionally comprehensive review conducted as part of the self-assessment activities. As a result of that review, the district was able to identify all but one area of need and develop an improvement plan that, with some revision, will bring about systemic change. The district is further commended for the prompt implementation of corrective action to address most areas of need identified during the self-assessment process. As a result, many of those identified areas were corrected prior to the on-site visit. The district is further commended for the many areas identified as compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified by the Office of Special Education Programs.

A review of data indicated the district has maintained a classification rate of students requiring special educational programming and services (excluding eligible for speech and language services) well below the state average. Further, for students ages six to twenty-one, the district's trend over the past three years has been to place 66% to 68% of the special education students in the general educational setting for more than 80% of the day. Additionally, review of data indicates that the district has consistently placed pre-school disabled students in general education early childhood settings.

At a public focus group meeting approximately fifteen parents who attended expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services. Parents noted that students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum in the least restrictive environment and that their children are receiving services that promote a high quality education. However, specific concerns were raised over budgetary constraints, the availability of services, the past high turnover rate within the child study team and the ability of staff to effectively implement an IEP. While several parents expressed their frustration in dealing with the district and feeling as if they had to fight for services for their child, the majority indicated that the district has alleviated some of their concerns by hiring additional staff. Parents did indicate that they were concerned that once the state monitoring was completed, the district would go back to prior years where there were insufficient special education staff members. Additionally, parents expressed that they had "nothing but good experiences" and the "superlative" quality of professionalism when dealing with the child study team and that the resource center teachers were "fantastic." However, some parents did feel that the "system" was more difficult prior to classification. This issue of the pre-referral and referral processes was identified by the district in the self-assessment and activities have been developed by the district to address these concerns. Parents of current and past students who attend the regionally supported PIE pre-school program also positively commented on their children's progress while in the program.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit included policies and procedures, dissemination of IDEA information, provision of related services for speech, occupational and physical therapy including goals and objectives and frequency, location and duration, length of school day, facilities, certifications, consent, notices of meetings, written notices, notices in native language, interpreters at meetings, independent evaluations, Child Find 3-21, direct

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

referrals, health summary, vision and hearing screenings, summer referrals, identification meeting timelines and participants, multidisciplinary evaluations, standardized assessments, functional assessments, bilingual evaluations, acceptance and or rejections of reports, reevaluations completed by June 30th of the student's last year in preschool, reevaluation timelines, planning meetings and participants, eligibility meetings and participants, signature of agreement or agreement and rationale, IEP meetings and participants, considerations and required statements, present level of educational performance, goals and objectives aligned with Core Curriculum Content Standards, age of majority, implementation dates, annual review timelines, 90-day timelines, notification and participation of out of district students in nonacademic and extracurricular activities, preschool transition planning conference, early intervention to preschool disabled placement by age three, functional behavior assessment, behavior intervention plan, statewide assessment participation, approved accommodations and modifications, IEP documentation, alternative assessment, IEP graduation requirements, class size waivers, age range waivers, group size for speech, home instruction, access sheets, access to records, maintenance of records, and documentation of locations of additional records.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding in-service training for professional and paraprofessional staff, extended school year, provision of counseling goals and objectives, transfer students, surrogate parents, referral process, pre-referral intervention, written reports signed and dated, provision of reports ten days prior to meetings, eligibility criteria, statement of eligibility for specific learning disability, screening for speech language, IEPs to parents, teacher access and responsibility, least restrictive environment decision making process, documentation, consideration of supplemental aids and services, regular education access in district, continuum of programs, age fourteen transition service needs, preferences and interests, agency involvement, discipline documentation to case manager, suspension tracking, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational setting, procedural safeguards, supplementary instruction and secure file cabinets and fax machine transmissions.

The focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit identified an additional area of need within the various standards regarding annual review timelines.

Within forty-five days of receipt of the monitoring report, the Demarest School District will revise and resubmit the improvement plan to the Office of Special Education Programs to address those areas that require revisions.